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Teaching the Whole Student: Faith 101

Wendy Wright

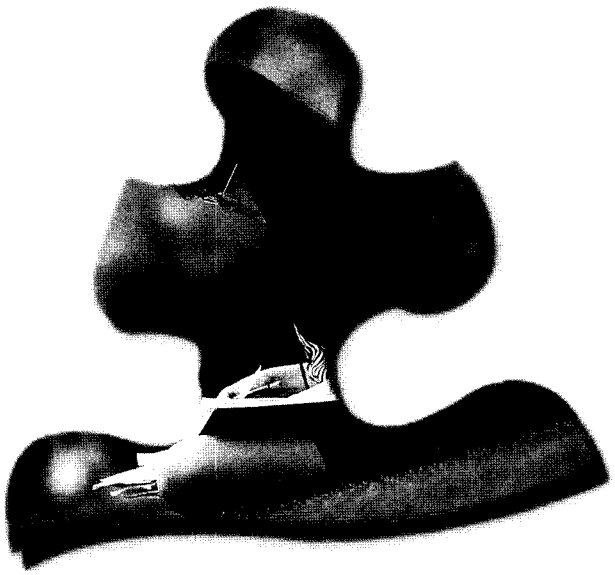
Teaching the Whole Person: "Faith 101"

WENDY M. WRIGHT
CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY

I would like to offer a few reflections on the manner in which I attempt to engage freshman students as whole persons in the context of Creighton's entry-level theology class, "Religious Inquiry: Christianity in Context," a course required of all our students. My concern in the whole course is threefold: (1) to expose students to the course content (the phenomenology of religion and an introduction to the essentials of Christianity in that phenomenological context); (2) to challenge them to think analytically and critically about that content; (3) to allow them the opportunity to integrate their new-found knowledge and questions into their own religiosity. While I do not assume that students are practitioners of any specific religious tradition (or, if they are, that they are fluent in or in accord with those traditions), I do assume that all students ask the great human questions that religious traditions address: What is ultimate? Where did we come from? Where are we going? How do I live most authentically? How should we regard one another? Why is there evil and suffering?

My reflections here focus on my third objective: allowing students, through the use of reflection papers, the opportunity to integrate their new, often disorienting, knowledge and "subversive" questions into the often unexamined religious attitudes they bring to the class. My intent is not to destroy the faith they come with but to recognize that genuine faith—a process of composing meaning and dwelling in some conviction of what is ultimately real, as Harvard's Sharon Parks describes it—matures by going through periods of profound reappraisal. Most of our students are ripe for such experience. They are, to use Parks's words, at a developmental stage that encourages the "search for a faith to live by."[1] This search is perhaps parallel to choosing or reaffirming or rejecting a specific religious tradition. But we are not talking about that here. The integrative move I hope to encourage is at once more foundational, more generically religious if you will, and more personalized.

The assignment asks students to write several "reflection papers" which integrate the course material with personal experience. These reflections are neither diary or journal entries, nor research papers or traditional pieces of critical analysis. The following are examples of the kinds of papers I assign:



1. Having studied scholarly definitions of "the sacred" (*i.e.*, an irreducible element of reality beyond ordinary experience), perduring human responses to the sacred, and cross-cultural patterns of human behavior and attitudes toward sacred time, places, and peo-

[1]Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

ple, give an account of your own experience of the sacred. How does this experience relate to the religious tradition in which you were raised or to the religious imagery and ideas implicit in the culture in which you were raised?

2. Having studied a variety of ways that various religious traditions have answered the question "How do we account for the existence of evil and suffering?" describe an experience of your own that forced you to ask this question. How did or do you answer it? (*i.e.*, articulate your own theodicy). How does your answer relate to the religious tradition in which you were raised or the " religious" views implicit in culture?

The point of these integrative essays (which I assign along with objective and essay testing of course material and more traditional research and analytic papers) is to give students the opportunity to work in a narrative mode, weaving their own often unconsciously held faith perspectives into the fabric of the course content. Most of them have never asked themselves whether they have had an "experience of the sacred" or whether they have a theodicy. The attempt at integration does several things. It will not allow them to separate what they learn about religion in the abstract from their deeply held, private religiosity. They cannot compartmentalize. This can have a number of possible effects. They may find the faith perspectives they have lived with to be wanting. This, I hope, may lead them to begin to build more adequate, adult versions of faith. They may begin to own their own roles as active participants in the construction and practice of faith. They may begin to honor the specificity and yet global commonality of faith experiences that they may have viewed as unimportant or isolated. They may experience confusion, even fear, if their world views are beginning to shift. They may need to be encouraged just to own their experience, or prompted to think about it more deeply, or reassured that the process of searching for a lively, viable faith is indeed a risky, challenging adventure.

The papers are open-ended. They are not expected to give a definitive response to the question but rather to initiate the process of self-exploration. The material in the papers is honored both in the sense of its privacy but also as an example of the essential raw data from which all human religiosity is born. The intelligent study of religion includes the study of one's own and other persons' religious experience.

I give these papers individualized attention, reading them not only with a sense of the intellectual growth of their authors but of the delicate dynamics of faith development as well. One author may be ripe for a challenge or question that would be entirely inappropriate, even destructive, for another. If I grade the papers, students understand that I am not grading the validity of their experience, but only its presentation. Often, I don't assign letter grades at all. This approach may be clearly distinguished from catechism, evangelization, faith sharing, therapy, or spiritual counseling. Students are never required to share the contents of their reflections with others, to divulge more than is appropriate. Their confidences are never made public in any way. The exercise is strictly academic, but is designed to challenge a view of the "academic" as necessarily (or ideally) disengaged from the complex and multifaceted matrix of the students' lives.

Not everyone in our department who teaches the course includes the integrative piece. Some think it peripheral to their course goals; others consider it outside the scope of teaching generally. As a rule of thumb, I would think that instructors who have a background in spiritual direction, counseling, or service learning, and who have a thoughtful familiarity with diverse religious traditions and multicultural expressions of human religiosity would be most comfortable implementing these approaches.

These reflection papers are my favorite part of the freshman course. With few exceptions, I have found that students learn profoundly through them. They learn that the recent suicide death of a friend is the same stuff out of which the great religious systems have emerged, that the god of their childhood must die to make room for the emergence of a god whose arms can embrace what they cannot, that the brief moments of silence that they enjoy on the ride home at night after work is the germ of a practice of contemplative attention cultivated by the worlds' religions, that that silence is the key to a deeply considered life, that falling in love and skiing in the Rockies can be as religious as attending worship services, that the religious rituals they have taken for granted are rich in meaning, that faith is as alive as they are able to see into the dense fabric of human experience and discern sacred presence there.

